Vol. IV *No. 2*

THE INTERNATIONAL MONTHLY

A Magazine of Contemporary Thought

AUGUST, 1901

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BURLINGTON, VERMONT, U. S. A.
148 College Street.

LONDON:
The International News Co., Chancery Lane.

LEIPZIG:
G. E. Stechert, Hospitalstrasse 10.

PARIS:
Brentano's, 37 Avenue de l'Opéra.

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The International Monthly

August, 1901.

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MUSIC IN THE CHURCH

LOUIS C. ELSON, *Boston.*

The ancient Hebrew and the Christian Churches were the chief factors in giving music a prominent position in divine worship, the latter following the former in the matter. Ancient Egypt was extremely sparing of music in her ecclesiastical ceremonies; and the religious rites of Imperial Rome were notable rather for the playing of various wind-instruments, too often mistranslated as "flutes," than for advanced combinations with good musical effects.

From its very beginning, the Christian Church made music its handmaid. The earliest music that can be traced in its worship was a free improvisation, borrowed from the Greek Skolion. This latter was always in evidence at ancient Athenian banquets, and was a spontaneous outburst in praise of love, or wine, or the host, or any subject connected with the feasting and merrymaking. In their gatherings in Rome, even in the first century, the Christian converts employed a similar music; but, as they were far less educated in art than the older Greek banqueters, they often borrowed from the pagan Romans the tunes to which they set their roughly enthusiastic poems; only melodies that had been contaminated by use in the theatres or in the temples were excluded.

The singing above described generally took place at the evening meal, which was thereby elevated into a religious service, and these "Agapæ," as they were called, find their modern counter-

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part in the "love-feasts" of the Methodist Church of the present. The music was in direct touch with the Scriptures, for Clemens Romanus, contemporary of St. Paul, states that the twenty-third Psalm was most frequently chanted. Exodus XV. and Daniel III. were favorite themes among the different Scriptural subjects selected. Extemporaneous praise of the new religion, of martyrdom, or of sanctity was sometimes added to the excerpts from the Holy Writings.

This free, though very expressive, school of singing came to an end with the establishment of a Liturgy; it is very probable, however, that some of the best effusions of the Agapæ were preserved, and even admitted into the regular service of later times. These fervid songs of earliest Christianity were unaccompanied, for it would have been very difficult for any one to follow the singer in his untrammelled chant. Many of the early Christians (chiefly of the humbler walks of life) were unable to play the instruments, and these also had been too freely used in theatre and pagan service to make them welcome at any Christian ceremony. "They convene at stated hours, before sunrise, and sing, each in turn, praise of Christ as of a god," says Pliny the Younger in describing the musical service of the Christians of his time.

But congregational singing very soon took the place of the solo work, and the earliest ritual of the Church seems to have dwelt more upon the efforts of the chorus than on the work of a choir. St. John Chrysostom describes this chorus work in unmistakable terms:—

"The psalms which we sing unite all the voices in one, and the canticles arise harmoniously in unison. Young and old, rich and poor, women and men, slaves and citizens,—all of us have formed one melody together."

The contest between the paid and the voluntary singing was not far off; but before we examine the later development, it may be well to add to the above data the following facts culled from the Fathers of the Church. St. John Chrysostom assigns the introduction of the first hymns to the Apostles themselves;

Eusebius states that St. Mark taught the early Egyptian Christians to chant their service; Tertullian says that the chants in Rome (probably in the second century) were given in a grave and deep tone, and that there was a contrast of style in singing in the different parts of the service. To be deprived of the right of joining in the singing was one of the punishments that the early backsliders of the Church felt deeply mortified at receiving.

As early as A. D. 320, Pope Sylvester I. founded a school for the training of church singers at Rome, and, in the year 350, Pope Hilary combined religious music and charity by causing the male orphans under his charge to be trained in ecclesiastical music.

The greatest compliment that could be paid to the musical training described above was given a dozen years later by Julian the Apostate (about A. D. 362), when he endeavored to found similar schools to train the Roman youth to offer music in the service of the pagan gods. His letter, No. 56, shows plainly how much he appreciated the value of the Christian music at this time, and his effort to establish, for the purposes of worship, a school of singing at Alexandria would have given a new beauty to the temple services of the gods but for his death soon after the initiation of the project.

Since we are not writing history, we may pass rapidly over the conflict that soon followed between the cultivated solo singers and the less musically adept members of the congregations; suffice it to say that the educated singers abused their privileges so greatly that the chanting systems of St. Ambrose, *circa* A. D. 374, and of St. Gregory, A. D. 599, were evolved to check their unseasonable display of vocal virtuosity. We need not dwell upon the fact that the Synod of Antioch, in 379, abolished the custom of allowing women to join in the singing, and that the Council of Laodicea, in 481, prohibited any but the clerks (*Canonicos Cantores*) from lifting their voices in the church music.

We find the folk-song reasserting its rights in sacred music when the art of counterpoint was freely launched into church use by the old Flemish composers, and in the fifteenth century it was a constant custom for the composer to take some familiar

folk-song as the core of his Mass, giving the melody to the tenor voice and wreathing counterpoint around it in the other parts. This practice even grew into a sort of challenge and gage of defiance; for other composers would take the same melody and work it over in more and more intricate fashion, until the "Flemish tricks" became a notorious part of sacred music, and all thought of fitness and of reverence was lost. In such rivalry, the song of "L'Homme armé" was set by Catholic composers some hundred times, culminating with a version by the great Palestrina himself.

Luther employed the folk-song in a purer and more fitting fashion. As he wished all of his congregation to sing, he chose many a popular song to lead them into the fields of music. He is known to have answered the objectors to this method with, "I do not see why the devil should be allowed to have all the good tunes!" A pregnant lesson can be drawn by some of the latter-day "popular" hymn composers from the title of one of the hymn collections approved by the great reformer. It runs, "Soldiers', Sailors' and Miners' Songs, and other Street-songs altered to the Service of God." It is in the "altered to the service of God" that the true point of Luther's music must be sought. The "altering" consisted in fitting the most dignified counterpoint to the folk-melodies.

In spite of the fact that many of the Protestant clergy persist in ascribing the beginning of congregational singing to Luther, the citations given above prove that the early Church used this mode of musical worship, and, in spite of the decrees of Antioch and Laodicea, the laity among the Catholics of Germany, even during the Lutheran epoch, had become thoroughly used to singing together in divine service, and were even encouraged to do so by the priests, who introduced "Marienlieder"—songs in praise of Mary—into the ritual. But it was Luther who first saw the possibilities of church music, and, if we dwell upon his work with some detail, it is because this devout musician may be in some degree a model for the church of the present.

Luther fully recognized the artistic music of the Catholic

Church; he had been made fully familiar with its worth as a choir-boy in Eisenach. In 1526 the great reformer seems to have intended the perpetuation of the mass itself. "Let the Latin mass," he writes, "be used by the young, so that the language in which so much good music is found shall not be strange to our youth."

Later, however, he endeavored to incorporate into the ritual a musical service very like the Mass, but to be sung in German. The Kyrie became "Gott sei uns gnädig"; the Gloria,—"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr"; the Credo,—"Wir glauben all' an einen Gott"; the Benedictus,—"Gott sei gelobet und benedeiet"; the Agnus Dei,—"O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig."

Although a service of the above numbers could be sung by a congregation alone, Luther was vehemently opposed to the disbanding of the choir; he held that service to be the best in which choir and congregation were both employed in musical numbers, and a letter written by him still exists in which he adjures a church, struggling with financial difficulties, not to dismiss its choir, which, he says, "will be a musical model to the congregation."

The key-note of Luther's strivings in sacred music may be found in his words:—

"I wish, following the example set by the Prophets and ancient Fathers of the Church, to make German psalms for the people; that is, sacred hymns, that the Word of God may dwell among them by the means of song also."

Never was a wish better or more thoroughly fulfilled. The grand chorals grew out of this idea, and they went far beyond their predecessors, the "Marienlieder." "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" became the war-cry of the wonderful period, and dignified chorals were heard in the school, the camp, along the highways, everywhere: the music of the Church became the music of daily life.

To build upon simple themes would seem to be the duty of the modern church composer if he desires to take the Lutheran lesson to heart; but this by no means justifies the introduction of taw-

dry tunes, marches, polkas, and other jingles forcibly wedded to religious words, into divine worship. "Altered to the service of God," says the hymn-book title quoted above, and this alteration implies that the best musical skill shall be united with the most comprehensible of melody. The loftiness of great choruses, uniting in tunes which shall not be beyond their capacity, yet shall be worthily musical, is a point of the ritual that composers and choir directors must study from the time of the Reformation.

The work of the choir, however, can be studied rather from England and France than from Germany. The fitness of artistic and highly developed music to adorn religious service had its clearest demonstration at the Council of Trent, during the progress of the Counter-reformation. The extremely florid vein of most of the Catholic church music came up for consideration before the Council at its twenty-second sitting, September 11, 1562. When the fanatics would have swept away the entire progress of the preceding centuries and have returned to the plain Gregorian chant, the more cultivated cardinals fought for the art, and, at the twenty-fourth sitting, reduced the opposition to a mere vague censure of "over-delicate music." Figural music, that is, counterpoint, was finally held to be elevating and well fitted to religious use.

The old English composers have given to the church repertory contrapuntal compositions that should be far more assiduously studied by American choir masters than is at present the case. While every schoolboy knows something of the "Elizabethan poets," very few understand that the Elizabethan period was the most glorious period of English musical composition; indeed, if one eliminate the name of Shakespeare, the musical epoch of the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth century might fairly balance the poetic one, and the names of Farrant, Weelkes, Morley, Orlando Gibbons, Dowland, Ravenscroft, Bull, Wilbye, Forde, Tallis, Tye, Byrd, and of others as well, form a good counterpoise to the roll that contains Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, Bacon, Marlowe, Sidney, Spenser, Massinger, and others.

If England has not a similar roll of great names in music to offer nowadays, she can still be a model in the matter of executing the great anthems and motettes. Every cathedral throughout the kingdom becomes a school of sacred singing in a manner that finds no counterpart in America; for be it understood that our habit of having a musician play the rôle of concert singer for six days of the week and then transform himself into a church tenor on the seventh, never gives the best results. If only some country could go beyond England in this matter and train a *mixed* choir and chorus to church work as she trains her male cathedral singers, it would achieve wonders in the field of ecclesiastical music.

As regards the employment of boys' voices in connection with the choir, we can also learn much from the mother country. As a rule, it is the Episcopal Church only that in America makes use of this beautiful adjunct of the service. Why creed or ritual should restrict the employment of music is a mystery, yet it is undeniable that the boy chorus is seldom heard outside of the Church of England, and that the orchestra is almost always confined to the Catholic Church. One might go beyond the boy chorus and use a number of children's voices, male and female, on occasions of especial rejoicing. The late Bishop Phillips Brooks was always enthusiastic on this subject, and the present writer has a valuable memento of the great preacher in a letter that expresses his delight at the incorporation of a large chorus of children in an Easter service at Trinity Church.

In America, we are but slowly emerging from the results of the legacy of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, who clung closely to John Calvin's skirts in the matter of music. The prejudice against the organ died very hard in New England. The first organ in Boston, offered to the Brattle Square Church, in 1713, was unanimously and curtly declined by that organization, and its setting-up in King's Chapel (Church of England) was attended by about as much agitation as the introduction of the wooden horse into Troy. As late as 1790, a wealthy parishioner of the first named church pleaded for permission to throw an organ, which

the society had finally bought, into Boston harbor, promising full reimbursement for the loss of the instrument. Park Street Church, long after this time, still clung to violoncello in preference to organ. Why the Puritans should have looked upon the violoncello as a godly instrument and shunned the organ or the violin as heterodox will probably never be satisfactorily explained, but the results are evident in the frequent leading of a congregation or a choir of to-day with a single non-harmonic instrument. The violin, from which the ban has now been removed, the cornet, and often a lusty-voiced precentor, leads the mass of singers as the bell-wether leads his flock.

The question of what the ideal musical church service should be, is not to be answered offhand, but surely some points of guidance may be gathered from the historical facts already cited. In the first place, the musical church service of the future should free itself from all fetters of prejudice, and admit every form of musical art that has been used successfully by any denomination whatever. The boy choir should not be suffered to be a matter of creed, nor the orchestra to remain almost entirely a Catholic institution, so far as the church service is concerned. An eclectic system of church music should be evolved, in which every element above described might be free to enter in, according to the exigencies of the occasion, and limited only by the size of the edifice, of the congregation, or of its purse. Naturally, the Catholic Mass, as a whole, could not enter into the Protestant Church, for it is fitted closely to its own ritual; but certain of its chief numbers could be employed, if given a good English paraphrase. The mighty choral should be assiduously cultivated. If every service contained at least one broad chorus of the dignified character of "St. Anns," it would be a good corrective for much of the jingly music that obtains in the United States. But, in the matter of choral work, the organist would be an important factor for good or for evil. The choral should be "given out" upon the organ a trifle faster than it is intended to be sung, for every congregation in Christendom sags a little from the given tempo. The organist should make a slight hold, or

fermata, upon the last note of each phrase, for in a large congregation the stragglers need to be brought home as often as each phrase.

It is a pity that there should be any difference of opinion regarding the mode of starting a large chorus in church. Some organists begin with a short grace-note, an *acciaccatura*, which is far too sudden a signal for a congregation to catch up. Others begin with an *arpeggio* effect upon the opening chord of the hymn or choral, which generally brings about the most ragged attack imaginable, since no one can tell exactly when the upper note is going to be sounded, and each singer will come in more or less promptly according to his personal equation. The sounding of the first note of the melody one beat before the beginning of each verse has none of these objections; nine-tenths of the congregation will sing the melody, and this clear and fairly deliberate signal starts them with surety and power. After the interludes, such a signal is especially necessary for a firm attack.

As regards interludes, much may be said pro and con; the organists have undoubtedly committed many faults in this field, and the best musicians have frequently been the greatest sinners, giving the right thing in the wrong place, that is, performing feats of harmonic and contrapuntal skill where the simplest stop-gap was required. As a result of the unexpected fantasias with which some organists have decorated their hymn accompaniments, many a clergyman has set his face against interludes altogether. This is, however, jumping out of the frying-pan into the fire, for the interlude is an absolute necessity to the hymn. It ought not to be regarded as anything but a covering over of the few seconds that are requisite in order to rest the lungs of the singers; and that interlude may be called the best that attracts no attention to itself. That the few seconds of recuperation are necessary to the lungs of the choristers may be practically shown by taking any hymn of moderate length and going through it without an interlude.

"Sun of my Soul" may serve to illustrate the case in point. It has five stanzas; each stanza has sixteen measures of music,

making in all eighty measures of music to be sung, without any rests but the short gasps at the end of the phrases and the pauses (necessarily not very long) between the stanzas. Hardly any song given upon the concert platform presents so severe a task. Let the experiment of such singing be tried at some vestry or prayer-meeting, and we believe that every clergyman and every member of the church committee will notice the difference between the bold heartiness displayed in the first stanza and the dragged-out condition of the singing in the last stanza.

But the interlude should do no more than serve as the necessary rest to the singers; far better a mere repetition of the last phrase of the music upon the organ than a senseless display of musical knowledge in the field of modulation, which one is too often called upon to hear. Every interlude should grow out of the music itself; a concise, coda-like reiteration of some thought contained in the music will always be sufficient, and no interlude should extend beyond eight bars. Distant modulations should be avoided, for they not only interfere with the reverential style that should characterize the work, but they are apt so to disturb the singers' sense of tonality that when the organist gives the starting-note, for the subsequent stanza, after a bold progress through several foreign keys, he will find his entire congregation, and sometimes even a trained chorus, entering timidly and without vigor.

An interlude after every eight lines of ordinary tetrameter will be found quite sufficient for ordinary purposes, and a contrast of major or minor may sometimes be permitted to rivet the thought of the verse that has preceded.

The great vocal fault of America, unclearness of enunciation, is never more plainly in evidence than in sacred solos. One might be contented to lose the meaning of some of the verses of the average drawing-room ballad, but to have such poems as Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light," Lyte's "Abide with Me," the refreshing poetry of George Herbert, or the tender thoughts of Phoebe Cary, distorted for the sake of a little fuller high note or an easier emission of tone is decidedly putting the cart before

the horse. One cannot expect clear pronunciation from a congregation, but one may demand it from the choir. England can teach America a lesson in this, as every cathedral service in that country proves. In America, it has been too placidly accepted that vocalism involves impurity of pronunciation; only in America would an invocation to "the God of *Bottles*," instead of the God of Battles, (we heard this effect once in a sacred service,) go unreproved and underided.

The employment of an orchestra would be a distinct step in advance in the music of many Protestant churches, but many would naturally hesitate before entering into so large an expenditure as this would involve. In such a case, the musical director might rearrange the scores of some of the less important works. Even the string quartette or quintette combined with horn and clarionet or flute would often form a fine support for certain choir numbers.

In the composition of church music, as in almost everything else, the supply is regulated by the demand, and there are scarcely any sacred concerted numbers existing between those that have merely organ accompaniment and those that demand full orchestral support. Yet we are convinced that such moderately scored numbers would soon be forthcoming if choir masters would only evince a desire for them. The mere addition of trombones or, much better, a contrabass to a fair-sized chorus would be a step in the right direction, for it would add a fulness to the fundamental notes that would lend much dignity to the more solemn numbers, and in congregational singing the contrabass would strengthen the part that is generally weakest in the harmony as sung. In England, the contrabass has been added, even to the military band, in certain concert selections, and we should cordially welcome its entrance into general service in church.

A less restricted repertory would be the first and most immediate result of some of the changes suggested above. The best part of the music of each church would enter into the service of all. Some of the shorter Palestrina numbers, "O Bone Jesu,"

"Jesu Rex," or "Rex Virtutis," for example, would appear with proper paraphrases in English; the orchestra, or some of its instruments, would be used as in the great Catholic services; from the Anglican Church the anthems of Purcell and of the older composers would be borrowed; from both of the above Churches the custom of stately chanting would be derived; Bach would prove an absolute mine of beauty; the hearty congregational work of the Evangelical Churches would be retained, but enriched and brought nearer to the ideal of Martin Luther.

This, roughly outlined, should be the church music of the future. It seems strange that, while music in general has taken up all modes of expression and treatment, church music should have been hampered by serious limitations and should have developed only in special grooves, according to the denomination that used it. The Catholic Church has had the most varied, the most artistic, the most powerful music, simply because so few limitations were placed upon it, and even in this church the grandeur of the Bach chorals is unknown.

America has in recent years made giant strides in general music; the contemptuous European saying of sixty years ago,—"Who reads an American book?",—could have been applied with tenfold force to the hearing of an American composition. To-day we have great composers even in the largest forms of composition, large symphony orchestras, renowned string quartettes, operatic performances equal to the best that Europe can hear; it is possible that it is reserved for our country to break the fetters in which church music has been so long confined; it is not beyond the bounds of probability that the American churches may yet establish a musical service that shall contain within itself the best artistic results that the ages have brought forth in every Church and in every nation.

"But," asks the timid Christian, "would not such a service be very like a concert?" In a certain sense, yes. Nevertheless, a Handel oratorio and a Bach "Passion Music" is also like a concert, though infinitely and deeply religious. The miscellaneous concert and the secular jingles should alike be denied entrance

within the walls of the sanctuary; but every phase of the different schools described in this article has but one purpose,—to lift the heart to God.

There is one matter connected with this subject that must be touched upon before concluding; it is the fact that clergyman and choir master are often at cross purposes, and too frequently believe that the success of one minimizes the power of the other. The music is hindered, instead of helped, by the pulpit in some churches. It is surely unnecessary to say that the music is secondary to the other parts of the service, but secondary only in the sense that music is secondary to poetry: its object is to aid, to strengthen, and to interpret. The combat between choir and pulpit began in the second century, and the reforms of Gregory, Ambrose, the Council of Trent, and so on, only mark stages of this interminable battle. The strife would end in a most valuable alliance if the clergy would but add something of music to their actual studies; Luther would never have evolved his glorious additions to the ritual but for his practical musical knowledge.

It has been said that music begins where language ends; if this be the case, it can carry the lesson of the sermon still deeper into the heart, and waft the devout prayer a little nearer to Heaven.

"Sweet shall resound the voice of joyous singing
As fervent worshippers approach the Throne;
And, while the chorus in its might is ringing,
The list'ning soul from earth to Heaven is swinging
On wings of Tone.

And, when the mighty organ tones are pealing,
A lofty message shall be sent abroad,
Bidding "Be still" to every sin-stained feeling,
While the rapt heart finds every phrase revealing
A path to God."

Gaylord Bros.
Makers
Syracuse, N. Y.
PAT. JAN. 21, 1908